African Cultural Survival in Gullah/Geechee Culture: A Dramatic Case Study

During the early 1930s Lorenzo Dow Turner, an African-American linguist, catalogued over 3,000 names and words of African origin along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. When he visited the small fishing village of Harris Neck in McIntosh County, Georgia, he met Amelia Dawley, who could sing a five line song in an African language. Amelia did not know the meaning of the song, but she knew that she had learned it from her grandmother who told her never to forget the song because it was her connection to the ancestors. Turner did not recognize the language, but it was later identified by Solomon Caulker, a graduate student from Sierra Leone as Mende, his native tongue. Although Caulker had never heard the song, he was certain that it was an old hymn, a women's song once used to call villagers together for a funeral.

In the 1980s, 40 years after Turner's visit to the Georgia coast, Joseph A. Opala, an American working at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, was studying the Bunce Island slave trade. Many enslaved had been sent from Bunce Island to rice plantations in Georgia and South Carolina. Opala joined forces with Sierra Leonean linguist Tazieff Koroma and ethnomusicologist Cynthia Schmidt to find the roots of Amelia Dawley's song. Remarkably they found an old woman named Baindu Jabati in the remote village of Senehun Ngoal, who had preserved a strikingly similar song. The song was a funeral dirge no longer used in the village. Baindu's grandmother had taught her the song and told her a lost kinsman would return who would be recognized by this song.

Opala and his team traveled to Georgia where they located Mary Moran, daughter of Amelia Dawley. Mary remembered hearing her mother sing the song and was able to sing it herself for the researchers. A reunion trip to Africa was immediately planned but was later postponed due to wars in the region. In 1997, Mary and 14 members of her family traveled to the African village of Senehun Ngola, where they were greeted with warmth and jubilation. Opala asked Nabi Jah, 90 year-old chief of the village, why a Mende woman exiled two hundred years ago would have preserved this particular song. Nabi Jah replied that to him the answer was obvious. "That song would be the most valuable thing she could take. It could connect her to all her ancestors and to their continued blessings." Then he quoted a Mende proverb, "You know who a person really is by the language they cry in."

Perhaps an unknown Mende woman, kidnapped and taken thousands of miles from her home, believed that her village funeral song would connect her and her descendants forever with their lost family in Africa. Her descendants today, in both Africa and America, can indeed use her song to trace their connections to one another after more than two centuries.

In his review of the film, Philip D. Morgan, editor of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, commented (1998),

> That a Mende burial song has survived among the Gullah people and can be traced to a particular location in Sierra Leone is a testament to the remarkable tenacity and spirit of an enslaved people. It also took impressive scholarly sleuthing to recover the precise links between an African village and a diaspora population in lowcountry South Carolina and Georgia.…

A documentary film, appropriately named *The Language You Cry In* (1998), was produced to commemorate the story of Amelia's song and the reunion trip to Africa. The government of Sierra Leone has issued repeated invitations for Mary Moran and her

family to make a return visit to their home in Africa. "We regard you," one official letter said, "as the descendants of Mende people taken forcibly from our shores more than two hundred years ago."

Amelia Dawley's Song

Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay tambay
Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay kah.
Ha suh wileego seehai yuh gbangah lilly
Ha suh wileego dwelin duh kwen
Ha suh wileego seehi uh kwendaiyah.

Everyone come together, let us work hard;
the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be perfectly at peace.
Everyone come together, let us work hard:
the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be at peace at once.
Sudden death commands everyone's attention, like a firing gun.
Sudden death commands everyone's attention, oh elders, oh heads of family
Sudden death commands everyone's attention, like a distant drum beat.

-- (*translated by Tazieff Koroma, Edward Benya, and Joseph Opala*)

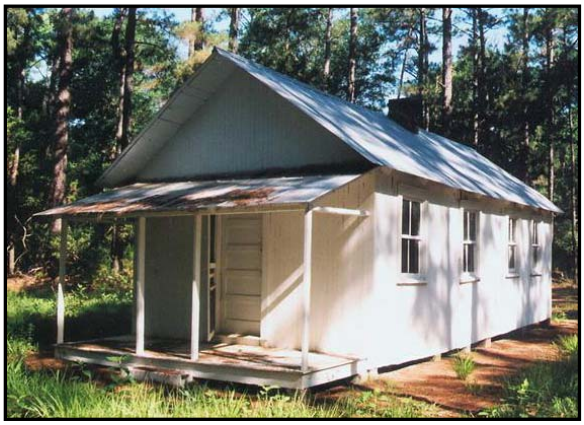
Mary Moran's son Wilson has been involved in this Special Resource Study from the beginning and has added valuable insights and comments to the process. Moran took the field research team on a tour of the area around Harris Neck in McIntosh County, Georgia, and shared the story of the Geechee community once located there. According to Moran, Harris Neck was once a thriving community with a church, a cemetery, a school, and a post office. Residents were not dependent on cotton culture or share cropping. Moran recalled his grandfather's self-sufficiency on the 111 acres of land he once owned. The family grew table crops, raised animals, fished, and trapped mink and other animals for meat and skins. Moran remembers traveling up and down the coast to barter for whatever else they needed.

Wilson Moran wears the African clothing he brought back from the reunion trip to Africa.

During the 1940's the Harris Neck lands were condemned for strategic military defense purposes, and the 75 families living on the property were relocated. The property is now included in the Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. Today the Moran family still raises some table crops, and Wilson is "in the creek" as often as possible. He takes pride in teaching his grandson the skills and stories he once learned from his own grandfather.

After the tour, Moran invited the field research team to share a meal in his home and introduced them to his wife Ernestine and to his parents. Members of the field research team chatted with her as she fried fish for supper. As of this writing (Fall 2003), Mary Moran is alive and in good health.

Gullah/Geechee Institutions

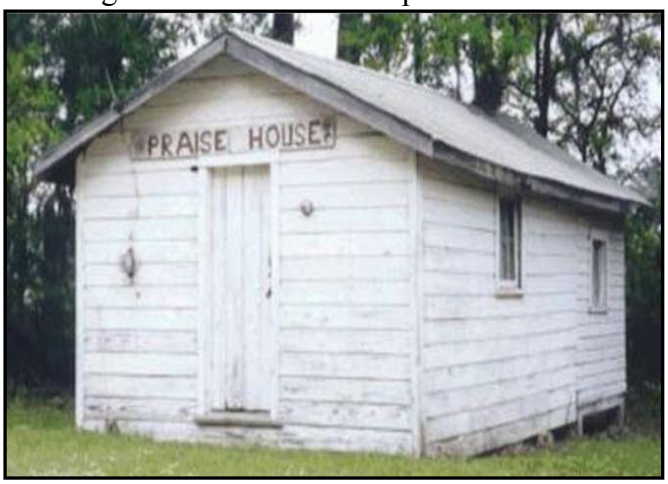


Strawberry Schoolhouse, Hobcaw Barony

Religion and spirituality have always played a major role in Gullah/Geechee family and community life. Even before Emancipation, a distinct body of social institutions and cultural traditions evolved to sustain and order Gullah/Geechee community life. Relative isolation and autonomy from a minority white population in the Low Country and Sea Islands helped to sustain the traditions of Gullah/Geechee populations. While sharing general characteristics with similar communities worldwide, e.g., importance of wider kinship connections, these institutions and traditions support the persistence of unique Gullah/Geechee communities. In these institutions and traditions, Gullah/Geechee communities sometimes show close similarities to other Afro-American creole cultures of the Western Hemisphere, as well as direct parallels to specific African analogs. Sometimes the similarities can be striking, as in the funerary custom found in both South Carolina and the Virgin Islands. For example, both on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands, and in at least some Gullah communities there is a death rite of passing an infant or young child across the body of a deceased relative to ensure the spiritual well-being of the child (Creel 1988; Hjerpe 2000:18; Nichols 1989)

Despite the absence of official political institutions in most Gullah/Geechee communities, leadership and social control have been effectively maintained by kinship and religion. Through multi-family residential compounds and extended kinship ties, and respect for elders, Gullah/Geechee people historically maintained a high degree of social solidarity and insularity from outsiders. Women served as leaders in some areas of religious life and frequently played a central role in perpetuating the distinctive Gullah/Geechee traditions.

Religious and community life on the plantation was centered around praise houses, small buildings used for both spiritual and civic activities. Even in slavery days, Gullah/Geechee people had their own standards of conduct and those who did not follow the community rules were punished. The elders managed these grassroots courts, and generally were able to keep strict order in the community. Many of these praise houses are still standing and some remain a vital part of Gullah/Geechee spiritual life.



Mary Jenkins Praise House, one of several remaining praise houses on St. Helena Island

Funerals were frequent events for enslaved Africans, since deaths occurred by the thousands, particularly among children. In the coastal region, historians estimate that nearly 90% of enslaved African

children died before they reached the age of 16. Funerals were generally held at night, possibly so that people from other plantations might attend, but more likely because that was the only time that people were not working. Creel cites the story of a 19th Century slave funeral as related by a former South Carolina bondsman. The funeral was for Mary, a very pretty and popular young woman who died after a lingering illness (1988:314-15).

> The coffin, a rough home-made affair, was placed upon a cart, which was drawn by an old Gray, and the multitudes formed in a line in the rear, marching two deep. The procession was something like a quarter of a mile long. Perhaps every fifteenth person down the line carried an uplifted torch. As the procession moved slowly toward "the lonesome graveyard" down by the side of the swamp, they sung the well-known hymn of Dr. Isaac Watts:
>
> When I can read my title clear
> To mansions in the skies,
> I bid farewell to every fear
> and wipe my weeping eyes.
>
> Mary's baby was taken to the graveyard by its grandmother, and before the corpse was deposited in the earth, the baby was passed from one person to another across the coffin. The slaves believed that if this was not done it would be impossible to raise the infant. The mother's spirit would come back for her baby and take it to herself.
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> .... the corpse was lowered into the grave and covered, each person throwing a handful of dirt into the grave as a last farewell act of kindness to the dead.... A prayer was offered.... This concluded the services at the grave.

Graves were traditionally marked in a number of ways from sticks to stone slabs to a unique style of carved wooden grave markers. Some graves were marked using plants, such as cedars or yuccas. Frequently, glass, china, or objects belonging to the deceased were used to decorate the grave. At times conchs and other shells of various kinds have been used to mark or even outline gravesites, and this practice has continued into the 21st Century. The use of seashells to mark graves, while not unique to Gullah/Geechee people, has been described by people in the study area as a connection to the water that brought them and would hopefully take them back to Africa after death. Although generations of the same family might be interred within a cemetery, they were not necessarily buried in adjoining plots (Creel 1988; Vlach 1977).

Slave cemeteries were generally located on marginal property, frequently thickly covered in trees and vines, which was not likely to be used by the planter for any other purpose. Local people often say that their enslaved. African ancestors preferred sites that were beside water so that their souls might easily return to Africa. Many of these cemeteries continued to be used after the Civil War and are now being lost to development.

Parsons (1923) observed that the most African American burial grounds were:

> …hidden away in remote spots among trees and underbrush. In the middle of some fields are islands of large trees the owners preferred not to make arable, because of the exhaustive work of clearing it. Old graves are now in among these trees and surrounding underbrush. … [Burial spots were] ragged patches of live-oak and palmetto and brier tangle which throughout the Islands are a sign of graves within, – graves scattered without symmetry, and often without headstones or head-boards, or sticks....

Located near the slave quarters of Thomas Spalding's plantation and sugar mill complex, Behavior Cemetery on Sapelo Island, Georgia, is the only remaining African American burial ground on the island. At one time there was a black settlement called "Behavior" on the southern end of the island near the cemetery site, but now the only surviving black settlement on the island is Hog Hammock, located about a mile from the cemetery. Early grave markers include short posts at either end of the graves and epitaphs on wooden boards nailed to adjoining trees. Personal belongs of the deceased were often placed on the graves, including cups, dishes, oil lamps (to light the journey home), and alarm clocks (to sound on Judgment Day). Most recent markers are made of local cement but there are a few granite grave stones and metal funeral home markers. Although oral tradition holds that burials have taken place at this site since slavery times, the death date on the oldest extant marker is 1890. Earlier markers may have been destroyed during the Civil War. Burials continue today at Behavior Cemetery, which as has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Development along the coastline has exposed many of these formerly hidden cemetery sites to public view and has made them subject to theft, vandalism and destruction, which have taken a heavy toll on these sacred places. The cemetery at Sunbury, Georgia, which contained wooden grave markers of a style that could be connected to African tradition, were recorded and photographed by scholars before the markers were stolen or destroyed (WPA 1986).

Retreat Plantation, St. Simons Island, GA, is now a gated country club. The Retreat Burying Ground, in use since 1800, is currently surrounded by a golf course. Although the cemetery is on private property, family members of those buried in the cemetery are allowed to visit. Family burials still take place in this cemetery. Not all private owners of traditional cemeteries are as cooperative with families of those buried at the site.

First African Baptist Church, Daufuskie Island, SC. Praise House (below) once associated with the church has been destroyed.

After the close of the Civil War, local Gullah/Geechee settlements began to establish their own congregations and erect church buildings. Some of those early churches, such as First African Baptist Church on Daufuskie Island, have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Churches of various denominations are located all over the countryside in the study area such that even very small communities may have more than one church. Small cemeteries frequently adjoin church buildings.

Although most Gullah/Geechee people subscribe to the basic tenets of European Christianity, African-derived practices and customs, such as strong belief in the supernatural, may appear as a fundamental part of Gullah/Geechee expression of Christian worship. The Christian concept of afterlife was, however, in juxtaposition to the African concept. According to African belief systems, the afterlife was to be very much as it had been on earth. For Africans who had come to America, such beliefs meant continuation of their enslavement. Thus, acceptance of the Christian idea of afterlife became part of Gullah/Geechee Christianity (Joyner 1984).

In addition to formal worship services in churches, Gullah/Geechee people follow religious practices associated with praise houses and other more private places of religious experience. Baptismal sites and burial grounds are likewise important markers of Gullah/Geechee life, places of cultural expression, and symbolic repositories of culture-history.

Church services and church-related events, which frequently involve the serving of food, appear to be generally well-attended. Sunday services often last for several hours and may include discussion of broader social issues either in the sermon or in discussions before or after the formal services. Thus, the church draws families and communities together into a larger social group.

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This public boat landing at Village Creek was once a baptismal site, St. Simons Island, GA

Although religious issues are foremost, church services also serve as a social space for the communication of secular ideas and as social and political forums for the community. Historically, black churches have been drawn consistently into the community to deal with important issues of a nonreligious nature. As a result, churches have evolved as focal points of social change. From helping displaced families after the Civil War to a leadership role in the Civil Rights movement to health issues such as diabetes, hypertension, and HIV – black churches have confronted and continue to confront social, economic, and political problems facing the African-American community. It is not by chance that a black church, First African Baptist Church in Savannah, was the site of General Sherman's first reading of Special Field Orders Number 15 and was later chosen by Dr. Martin Luther King for the first delivery of his "I Have a Dream" speech in July of 1963 (Billingsley 2002).

Kin-ties and religion continue to serve as a powerful bonding force among Gullah/Geechee people despite the stresses of dispersion due to emigration and breakup of family land holdings. There is grave concern, however, that continued family stress over land issues may lead to dissolution of kin loyalties.

With population disruption, sites of religious expression have become even more important as anchors of communities and help to foster a sense of historical continuity for Gullah/Geechee people as they encounter the challenges of present. Although the same may be true of former schools and other meeting places, it is the preservation of religious places that is often of greatest concern.

Baptismal sites are also important markers of Gullah/Geechee community life. Many churches in these communities traditionally conducted baptismal rites in the ocean or tidal creeks. The activities began on the high tide and lasted all day, so that sins could be washed away with the ebbing tide. Many baptismal sites, as is true of family burial places, are becoming increasingly inaccessible to Gullah/Geechee people. Golf courses, resorts, fences, beachfront development, boat landings, marinas, and the coastal population

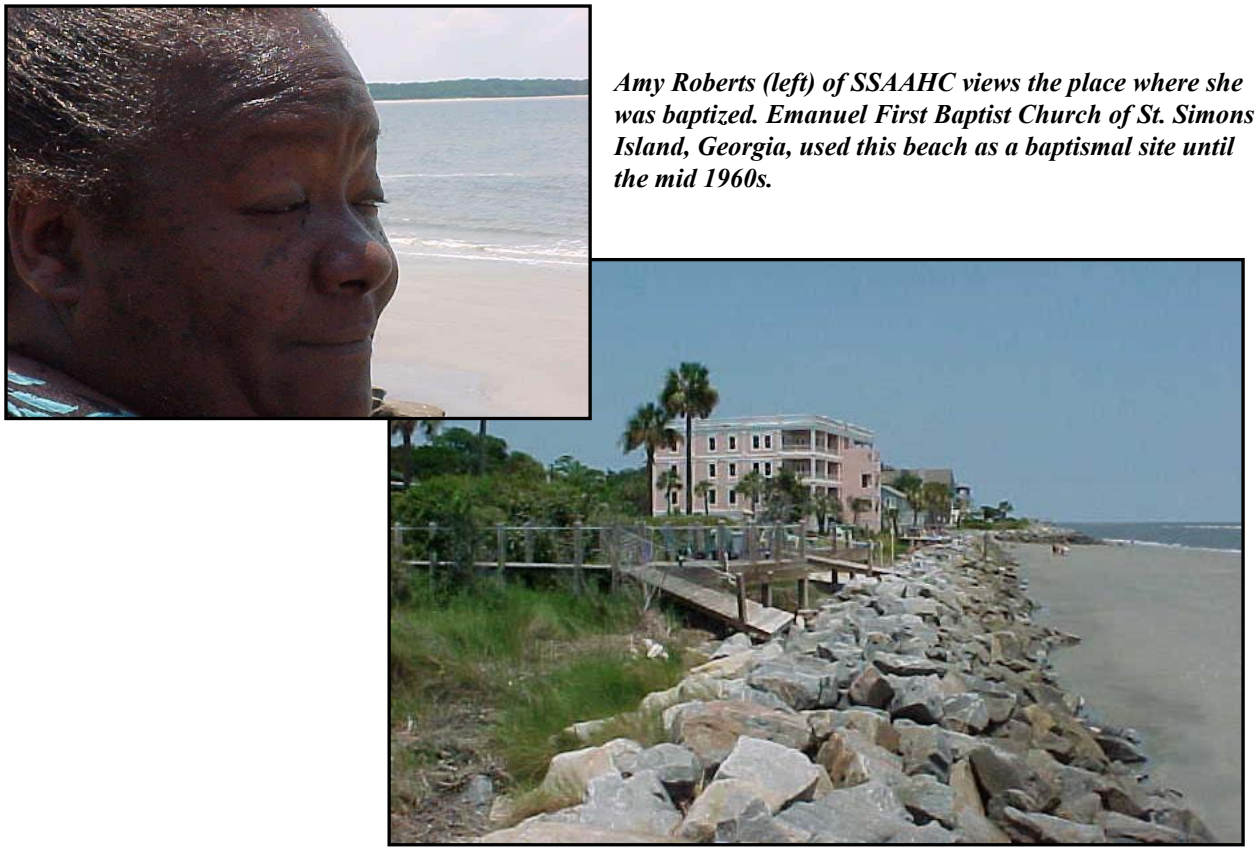
First African Baptist Church, Cumberland Island National Seashore, Cumberland Island, Georgia.

Historic African-American Cemetery on Sullivan's Island, SC, seeks donations for research and restoration.

explosion are all encroaching upon and in some cases overtaking these sacred sites.

As rural populations become smaller, rural congregations dwindle, praise houses fall into disrepair, and access to baptismal and funerary sites becomes more difficult. School houses, traditional gathering places for children from the community, have fallen victim to the racial integration of school systems. As these community institutions are lost, Gullah/Geechee people face yet another blow to their cultural identity. As a result, many Gullah/Geechee community activists within the study area have taken on preservation projects related to these traditional cultural sites.

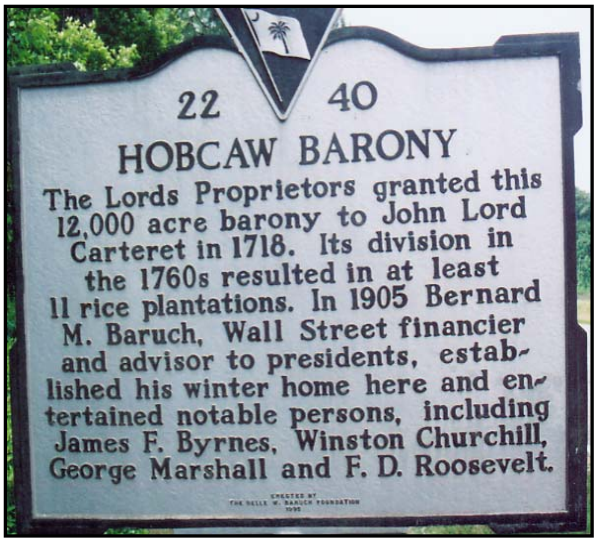
Gullah/Geechee people have strong spiritual connections. Because of this deep spirituality, religious institutions have always shown remarkable versatility and vitality in helping communities adjust to rapidly changing circumstances. Several of these churches participated in this project by inviting the NPS team to hold meetings in their buildings. Churches are frequently the places where community activist and/or preservation meetings are held within communities. Given the current atmosphere of expanding stresses on community life, churches and other religious organizations may have begun to reach the limits of their capacity for maintaining social and cultural cohesion.



Amy Roberts (left) of SSAAHC views the place where she was baptized. Emanuel First Baptist Church of St. Simons Island, Georgia, used this beach as a baptismal site until the mid 1960s.

The Impact of Coastal Development on Gullah/Geechee People

The first inklings of massive impacts on post-Civil War Gullah/Geechee cultural stability came during the 1920s and 1930s when wealthy industrialists from the North discovered the abundant wildlife and mild winter climate of the Low Country and adjoining islands. Magnates, such as Bernard Baruch, R. J. Reynolds, Howard Coffin, and Tom Yawkey, bought failed rice plantations from their bankrupt owners and established hunting lodges for themselves and their friends. In some cases Gullah/Geechee people who were living on this land were allowed to continue their farming and/or work for the new landowner, while other new owners forced black people from the land.



With land ownership tangled in years of subdivision of property among families and inheritance of land without recorded wills (heirs' property), Gullah/Geechee people could not prove their ownership rights to their home sites. As years passed and more people died in testate, the property became more entangled in communal ownership. Many were forced from their land and/or the land and waterways where they had traditionally farmed, hunted and fished to supplement their tables and their incomes.

Collecting clams for supper – Trespassing required now.

The pressures began even earlier for Gullah/Geechee people who were involved in commercial fishing. Proximity to the sea fostered an early tradition of seafood harvesting, ranging from cast netting to small-scale commercial shrimp boats. Economic gain from catching and selling seafood began before the end of slavery and continued into the twentieth Century. The African-American shrimping fleet was a major factor in the development of commercial fishing in the region. Competition came from more sophisticated fishermen with greater capital resources. According to Benjamin Blount (2000) the formerly self-sustained Gullah/Geechee fishing boat captains were largely replaced by others and their role reduced to that of laborers in the fishing industry. Pollution from the expanding timber industry, recent catastrophic hurricanes, and pressures on commercial fishing worldwide have also contributed to further decline of the maritime economy of Gullah/Geechee people.

The military has also played a significant role in the process of change. The Marine Training Center at Parris Island in Beaufort County, South Carolina, was constructed during the 1880s. During World War II, traditional Gullah/Geechee lands in McIntosh County, Georgia, were used by the federal government for coastal defense purposes.

The great transformation, however, began in 1957 when Charles Frasier launched the construction of Sea Pines Plantation on Hilton Head Island. The availability of air conditioning suddenly made the sea islands appealing to affluent people. It was not very long before other developers joined in, and resorts sprang up all over the island. Although only about 20% of the island was actually owned by Gullah/Geechee residents, much of the remaining land was owned by absentee landlords who allowed free access to their property. The absentee landlords quickly sold out to developers. Between l950 and 2000, the South Carolina Low Country counties increased by 151% while the national population as a whole increased by only 86%.

Before construction of Sea Pines Plantation, Gullah/Geechee residents had been free to hunt and fish all over Hilton Head Island. Suddenly fences and gates blocked much of the land. Residents were cut off from their hunting and fishing grounds as well as their traditional burial grounds. Fences meant that Gullah/Geechee islanders could no longer "go in duh creek" to get supper. The Sea Pines story has been repeated many times over on islands all over the study area. Nick Lindsey, local historian, asked an old friend on Edisto to talk about the differences between the "old days" and today (2000).

> Everything change up now. In the old day, money? Take him or leave him, be all right. Now? Must have him now. Everything change up now.

This Daufuskie Island, SC, Community Center was once the schoolhouse where Pat Conroy taught

Novels such as *The Water Is Wide* and others by Patrick Conroy (1972) expressed the distinctive beauty of his beloved Carolina coast in a way that appealed to people worldwide. Although it was not the author's intent, the popularity of these stories hastened the influx of people to the area. There was a resulting population shift on the Sea Islands from the traditional rural black majority to an affluent white majority. This change brought intensified racial prejudice and segregation to islands where Gullah/Geechee people had lived for years in relative isolation from the outside world. Although Daufuskie Island, which Conroy called Yamacraw in his novel, still has no bridge to the mainland, but nearly half of the island has been lost to resort development. The delineation between resort and rural agriculture is dramatic.

Resorts, golf courses, and coastal suburban development on the islands led to steadily increasing property values and skyrocketing taxes. Island economies changed from rural subsistence farming to a service-based economy. Native islanders were often unable to bear the tax burden, and many were forced to leave their homes. Not just Gullah/ Geechee people but all islanders of modest means, black and white, have been adversely affected by the rising taxes caused by development and population growth.

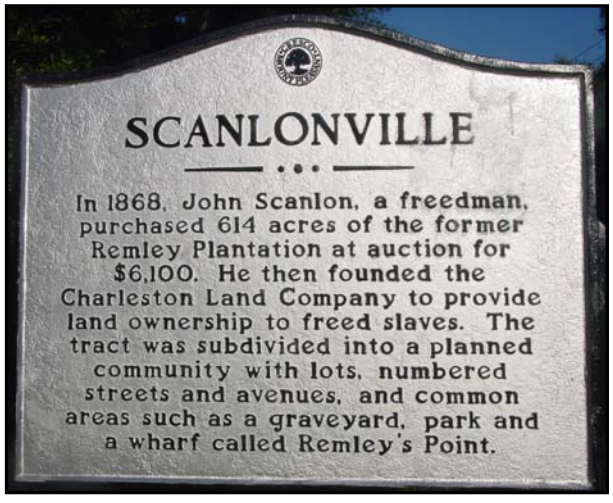
With the loss of land and easy access to fishing and hunting, came a loss of Gullah/ Geechee self sufficiency and autonomy. Displaced and landless Gullah/Geechee people increasingly turned to hourly labor, out-migration, or both. Although some islanders

chose to remain in the vicinity to work in the resort industry, they soon found that only minimum wage service sector jobs were available to them. Low income forced these resort workers to face ever-increasing commuting distances required to find affordable housing.

During the 1960s, as the number of outsiders relocating to the islands rose to a peak, there was a second major out-migration of Gullah/Geechee people to the North. They were essentially pushed from their homeland by loss of land for agriculture, lack of job training, lack of skilled jobs, and few opportunities for advancement (Lemann 1992). Many of these people sent their children home to the islands in the summertime, so that the youngsters could get to know their relatives and experience the simplicity of island life. Others, however, may have forever lost the connection to their ancestry and culture. It is interesting to note that some of the people who left in the 1960s are now returning to their roots and are among the most active in trying to preserve Gullah/Geechee community and tradition. Some of the "returnees" spoke with the field research team and expressed a strong, almost irresistible, spiritual need to return to their ancestral roots in the Low Country.

The construction of Interstate 95 in the mid 1970s was a major factor in the transformation of coastal zones. I-95 is the New York to Miami corridor and is thus one of the most heavily traveled interstate highways in the United States. Coastal regions of the study area, other than specific resort developments, were still relatively remote and isolated until after the construction of I-95. The highway not only gave easy access to Hilton Head Island and its neighboring resorts in South Carolina, but also created access to pristine islands and beaches. Development along I-95 in Georgia has been slower to occur, perhaps because the highway lies along the inland edges of great salt marshes. These marshes are likely to be viewed by uninitiated tourists as "swamps", rather than as the highly productive ecosystems that they, in fact, are. Almost 50% of the remaining salt marsh along the eastern seaboard of the United States lies along the Georgia coastline and much of it is currently protected by government agencies.

The Sea Islands are not the only areas at great risk. Mainland Gullah/Geechee communities are also threatened by increasing coastal development and population growth with the resulting encroachment into rural neighborhoods. Once there were several postbellum freedmen communities in or near Mt. Pleasant, SC, in upper Charleston County. Among these are Phillips, Greenhill, Snowden, and Scanlonville. Greenhill and Snowden, though surrounded by suburban development, appear to be holding their own. Both Scanlonville and Phillips are under serious threat and have sought help from the South Carolina Department of Archives and History to be designated as Historic Neighborhoods. Both communities have been thwarted in their preservation



efforts by the lack of standing historic structures at least fifty years old, as ordinarily required for National Register status.

Scanlonville was formed as a voluntary association of freedmen, who sought to be landowners. Robert L. Scanlon purchased the 614-acre Remley Plantation at auction and held the land in trust for the Charleston Land Company. By 1870 the land had been platted into home sites, farm lots, and a communal park and cemetery. The cemetery has been approved for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, but cannot be officially listed until a lawsuit involving the property is resolved. Developers want to move the graves so that the historic site can be used as waterfront residential property (Trinkley 2001), which would effectively eliminate the historical significance of the property under existing criteria of the National Historic Preservation Act. Both Scanlonville and Phillips have been thwarted in their preservation efforts by the lack of historic structures.